American Foreign Policy
Toward the Syrian Civil War

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American Foreign Policy Toward the Syrian Civil War

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A Thesis in the Field of International Relations
For the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the shift in the “schizophrenic” American foreign policy toward the Syrian Civil War from 2011 to 2015, following the Arab Spring protests. What objectives were outlined, and what events on the ground influenced American policy toward Syria? To what extent did key governmental institutions, American leaders and international alliances help to shape policy? The research examines policy objectives through contrasting analytical lenses using the Rational Policy Model, the Organizational Behavior Model and the Bureaucratic Politics Model developed by political scientist Graham T. Allison. The International Politics Model is added to underscore the influence of international politics at play. The study found that the war in Syria resulted in an “escalating stalemate” due to the strategic competition between regional and extra-regional actors. Furthermore, American policy objectives toward Syria failed to materialize due to the failure of the Obama administration, Congress and the United Nations Security Council to develop a military solution to facilitate political objectives.
Dedication

To Babi, Mami and Da, for your love, wisdom and resilience. And to my soul mate Va, for being my greatest inspiration. I am lucky to spend my life with you.
Acknowledgments

I would like to gratefully acknowledge Dr. Brian Mandell and Dr. Doug Bond for their guidance and support in this project.
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List of Abbreviations

- al-Qaeda Iraq: AQI
- Central Intelligence Agency: CIA
- Free Syrian Army: FSA
- G20: Group of Twenty
- Gulf Cooperating Countries: GCC
- International Rescue Committee: IRC
- Local Coordination Committee: LCC
- Non-governmental Organization: NGO
- North Atlantic Treaty Organization: NATO
- New Syrian Forces: NSF
- Office of Food for Peace: FFP
- State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration: PRM
- Syrian Arab Red Crescent: SARC
- Syrian Opposition Coalition: SOC
- United Nations: UN
- United Nations Security Council: UNSC
- United States: US
- United States Government Accountability Office: GAO
- United States for International Development: USAID
- United States Special Operations Forces (SOF)
- ISIS, IS, hereinafter referred as the Islamic State: Islamic state of Iraq, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The Islamic State is a transnational Salafi jihadist militant group affiliated with the Wahhabi doctrine of Sunni Islam, primarily based in Iraq and Syria.
Definition of Terms

• Terrorism: a deliberate use of violence conducted by non-state actors in order to complement politically, socially, economically or religiously motivated modifications of the state. Terrorism is an alternative form of coercive diplomacy, which employs fear and anxiety to influence its target.¹

• Violent non-state actors: The National Intelligence Council of the United States defines violent non-state actors as “non-sovereign entities that exercise significant economic, political, or social power and influence” both at the national and international level.² By definition, terrorist groups are always non-state actors. Non-state actors may be transnational, in which case members do not align with a certain nationality. Instead they affiliate with those who manifest common religious, political, social, economic or person objectives.³

• Public diplomacy: strategic negotiations conducted between two or more states. Diplomacy is used by states to signal specific foreign policy objectives.⁴


• Responsibility to Protect (R2P): an international human rights norm endorsed by member states of the United Nations at the 2005 World Summit to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.\textsuperscript{5}

• Humanitarian objectives for the purpose of this paper are defined as efforts to provide food, shelter and medical services; to secure the permission of the Syrian government to deliver aid; to combat siege tactics used by the Syrian government as a weapon of war; and to supply vetted opposition groups with weapons for self-defense against the al-Assad forces.

• Refugees, according to the 1951 Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, are “individuals who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-rounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”\textsuperscript{6} The Convention acknowledged the right of persons seeking asylum citing Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of human rights of 1948.

• Intervention for the purpose of this study is the use of “hard power”, such as unilateral acts of military aggression to advance political motives. Engagement in the words of Gary J. Schmitt is the effort to “do more with less.” It refers to the use of “soft power” such as diplomatic commitment to coalition and international institutions to enable the political agenda. The benefit of soft power, also known


as smart power, is that “coalitions of like-minded liberal governments confer a degree of legitimacy.”

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Chapter I
Introduction

The Trump administration entered the White House in January, presenting an ample opportunity to reflect on what can be learned from the Obama administration for addressing the ongoing Syrian conflict. Following the Arab Spring protests in 2011, and in particular the rise of the Islamic State, the Syrian Civil War has been an important component of American foreign policy. Civil wars arise worldwide, and to echo Senator Marco Rubio’s sentiment amid the United States (US) Policy Toward Syria congressional meeting in 2013, why do we care about Syria? Senator Lieberman emphasized the importance of leading a humanitarian intervention and bringing to an end the massive human rights violations in order to regain the confidence of the Arab world.\(^8\) Second, Ambassador Jones explained that a primary reason for engagement in Syria is to secure the safety of regional allies. Third, the United States aimed to eradicate terrorist groups. Lastly, Jones emphasized that the al-Assad administration has in its possession a “very large amount of chemical weapons” that should not to get in the hands of people who could use them against the United States or its allies.\(^9\)


The conflict in Syria is complex and unconventional due to the many regional and extra-regional actors involved, as well as the unprecedented entanglement of violent non-state actors. As a result, it has quickly evolved into a regional power struggle and an international concern. General Martin Dempsey stated that when speaking about Syria we are looking through a “soda straw” – it is important to look at Syria in the context of the region. Syria does not exist as an individual, isolated country but one that heavily involves regional and extra-regional actors.\textsuperscript{10} Indeed, the warring actors in Syria are manifold: the balance of power at play between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and Iran is pursued “with the understanding that the future of the Middle East is decided in Syria.” Consequentially, these neighboring countries have armed opposition groups to gain leverage.\textsuperscript{11}

By 2012, Russia also became involved as leading arm supplier to Assad. Russia’s naval base in Tartus – its only naval port to the Mediterranean – quickly prompted Vladimir Putin to spring to action in support of al-Assad.\textsuperscript{12} Inside Syria, over 2,000 opposition groups were vying for power by 2013.\textsuperscript{13} At the heart of the conflict, more than 12 millions of Syrian civilians have been displaced or forced to endure the tragedies of

\textsuperscript{10} U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, \textit{U.S. Policy Toward Syria}, 20.


\textsuperscript{12} U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, \textit{U.S. Policy Toward Syria}, 29.

In 2014, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported that that worldwide forced displacement of refugees was the highest level ever recorded, with Syrian leading the newly displaced.15

Despite these matters putting American interests at risk, a “red line” was never enforced by the United States. Dr. Vali Nasr, Dean of John Hopkins School of Advance International Studies, testified that American leaders signaled to the neighborhood that the United States would be involved in resolving the crisis but neglected to do so.16 The hesitation to act stemmed from America’s role in the War on Terror, particularly in Iraq and Iran. In order to avoid “another Iraq” President Obama did not intervene militarily despite his “red line” comments when evidence suggested President al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons against civilians.17 Instead, the United States, alongside Russia, launched air strikes to degrade terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and pursued diplomatic means for the removal of President al-Assad’s chemical weapons.18 As a result of these mixed signals, BBC Monitoring European called American policy toward

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Syria “schizophrenic” for calling on al-Assad to step aside but failing to pursue his dismissal to its full diplomatic and military capabilities.19

These issues shape the central questions this thesis seeks to answer: What events and trends between 2011 and 2015 have shaped United States policy toward Syria? Have these policies helped stabilize Syria by bringing an end to human rights abuses and leading the political transition to a representative government? How can the next administration, in concert with Congress and international alliances, build upon existing policies and trends to maximize the stabilization process in Syria whilst protecting American interests? Specifically, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1) Have US policies enumerated stated objectives for leading negotiations toward a representative government in Syria? Have US sanctions against the Syrian government worked in favor of US interests?

2) What is the opportunity cost for unilateral and multilateral action toward Syria? What actions can the US take in Syria to improve its relations with the Arab World in the years to come?

3) Has the temporary US alliance with opposition groups – namely the SOC, al Qaeda and the Islamic State20 – led to the rise of regional violent extremists? What official efforts aimed to prevent the rise of


terrorism? How effective were these policies?

4) To what extent did humanitarian efforts dominate US policy?

Overview of the US Response

In response to the human rights violations by the Syrian government, the United States asked al-Assad to step down. In the beginning, the United States believed that President al-Assad would step down because he lacked the determination to remain in power. The “managed transition” plan consisted of United States allies – Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia – supplying weapons to the Opposition forces. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), headed by then director David Petraeus, would assist the allies in the covert operation.21 American policies toward Syria consisted of a mostly political approach, with the belief that a military strategy was not necessary to achieve policy objectives and manifested in the following ways.

First, President Obama imposed economic sanctions against the government. By 2013, the United States froze $80 billion USD of Syrian funds. American allies also imposed sanctions. Oil revenue from the European Union, which prior to the conflict accounted for one-third of the government’s revenue, was halted due to President Obama’s encouragement.22


22 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Policy Toward Syria, 15.
Second, due to the escalating civil war in Syria and its subsequent threat to the region, the United States supplied opposition groups, such as the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), with non-lethal weapons.23 This strategy was designed to create a Western-friendly opposition force, whilst simultaneously decreasing the risk of rebellion groups forging alliances with local and foreign actors with radical agendas.24 Leonard Weinberg asserts that making public military commitments risks an embarrassing failure. Covert assistance, he continued, could help retain US influence in the region whilst keeping a low profile. In the long run, this strategy would make America a less attractive target.25

Third, President Obama publicly stated that if chemical weapons were used, that would be a “red line” that would “change his calculus.” However, when evidence seemed to suggest the use of chemical weapons by the Assad administration, the Administration failed to flex its military muscle.26 According to Michelle Bentley, President Obama used chemical weapons as “decisive intervention language” to promote a multilateral intervention.27

23 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Policy Toward Syria, 63.


Indeed, one of President Obama’s chief strategies was to multilaterally intervene in Syria to facilitate the removal of al-Assad. In order to avoid “another Iraq” the United States looked to the United Nations for a multilateral intervention. The multilateral commitment was favored because it would confer legitimacy for the intervention. However, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) failed to solicit votes for the sought after humanitarian intervention under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. The main criticism for the humanitarian intervention, declared by Russia and China, was the fear that the United States-led intervention would pursue a regime change. Instead, guidelines for an immediate cessation of violence and principles for a political transition were enumerated in the *Geneva Communique*. This course of action largely removed the option to militarily intervene and instead focused on a political strategy.

President Obama then turned to Congress, asking the House Foreign Relations Committee for authorization to lead the international coalition in employing limited air strikes against the Syrian government. The Committee rejected to authorize the strikes, leading President Obama to diplomatic negotiations yet again.

As the role of the Islamic State grew in the Syrian conflict in 2013, the United States joined the international coalition, inclusive of Russia, to degrade and deter the


Islamic State.\textsuperscript{30} This strategy confused many within the Obama administration – such as former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton – because it focused on combating violent non-state actors only and largely neglected the culprit responsible for the human rights violations, President al-Assad. Dr. David Kilcullen testified before Congress stating that it is “probably not the best solution to say that the real problem is ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. The real problem is the regime…”\textsuperscript{31}

This undertaking gave way to vague and ill-defined policies. Indeed, American policies toward Syria since 2011 have adjusted significantly. Senator Corker declared, “… in the beginning it was sort of focused on more of an Arab Spring movement of democracy and a representative government, and now our objectives are more focused on making sure the chemical weapons are not utilized and it does not become a safe haven for terrorist activity or a hotbed of terrorist activity. So I know that that is quite an evolution from where we began.”\textsuperscript{32} Naturally, changes in objectives, and subsequently policy, are to be expected in the face of a moving target like the Syrian conflict. However, there has been wide gap between policy objectives and actions taken by the United States, particularly in respect to bringing the conflict in Syria to a halt. But are these anomalies in policy development a result of inconsistent strategies or does assessment of the situation vary amongst officials?

\textsuperscript{30} U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, \textit{U.S. Policy Toward Syria}, 22.


\textsuperscript{32} U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, \textit{U.S. Policy Toward Syria}, 22.
In “Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” Graham Allison explains that foreign policy analysts examine and prioritize policy decisions through different analytical lenses. Most analysts explain foreign policy decisions through the lens of a unified national government, however governments are large monoliths and like machinery, employ different “gears and levers” in order to properly function. What each analyst deems important varies across government divisions, and thus, different “conceptual lenses.”

According to Allison, foreign policy analyses take place in three conceptual lenses: the Rational Policy Model, the Organizational Behavior Model and the Bureaucratic Politics Model. The Rational Policy Model will focus on “acts” and “choices” of the American policy to achieve national policy objectives given Syria’s position in the Middle East. The Organizational Behavior Model examines priorities or “outputs” stemming from standard pre-determined procedures of military and intelligence institutions. The Bureaucratic Politics Model is rooted in the Game Theory and will focus on the political efficacy or “outcomes” of diplomatic discussions. Allison neglected to include the International Politics Model, stating that most scholars look to acts of nations in foreign policy analysis.

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34 Allison, “Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” 691.
have added the International Politics Model, based on the theory of realism in international relations. The realist theory dictates that a state’s political acts are intended to maximize power and security in the international anarchical system. Can liberal agendas, which tend to emphasize cooperation, thrive in an anarchic international system? The International Politics Model considers the influential role of international alliances on American policy toward Syria. The four models will present four different “cuts” of the policy-decision making processes, taking into account the different analytical lenses.

The research will focus on American policy formulation toward Syria following the Arab Spring protests in 2011 until 2015. The analysis will also take into account events that influenced policy through conflicts in the neighboring region, such as Iran, Afghanistan and Iraq amid America’s War on Terror. The analysis will draw upon data from the American government, such as minutes from congressional meetings from the Library of Congress, Executive Orders and proceedings of international entities such as the United Nations and the Free Syria Campaign, which may have helped influence policies toward Syria.

The research considers the difference in priorities of objectives between governmental institutions, political leaders and international alliances. “Priorities” will evaluate, for each model, the importance of leading the democratic transition and the removal of al-Assad, humanitarian objectives, the cost benefit for unilateral and

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multilateral engagement, and the commitment to the insurgency forces. Allison’s conceptual models will assist in determining how the Executive branch, in collaboration with the Legislative branch, military and intelligence institutions as well international alliances can reinforce the United States commitment to Syria. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the Syrian conflict, the next section will enumerate some of the most influential actors involved in each side of the conflict.
Chapter III
The Syrian Conflict in Context

Martini et al., explained that Syria is an arena for “strategic competition.”\textsuperscript{36} This is due to the external actors – both regional and extra-regional – that the civil conflict has drawn. Syria is not seen as an individual country; it is part of the regional puzzle. In addition to regional actors like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the conflict has drawn actors from further afield, such as the United States and Russia. The involvement of external actors is likely to perpetuate the conflict in Syria for years to come whilst simultaneously increasing the intensity of the fighting. Furthermore, their findings conclude that supporters of the Assad administration have higher stakes in the conflict and therefore are more likely to invest financially and militarily than supporters of the opposition. The existing stalemate is likely to continue unless the Unites States increases its support of the opposition by providing military support or Iran and Russia increase their support to the al-Assad administration.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36} Jeff Martini Erin York and William Young, “Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition,” 1.

\textsuperscript{37} Jeff Martini Erin York and William Young, “Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition,” 1.
Internal Actors

The internal actors are presented next, beginning with the al-Assad Government.

The al-Assad Government

The Syrian government’s prime objective is survival. Al-Assad’s strategy for defeating the uprising has consisted of brute force against the opposition fighters. In addition, the Government has employed violence and coercion against civilians and protesters in order to hinder and prevent their support for opposition groups. For example, plain-clothed militia known as the Shahiba has terrorized communities that have sought to coordinate against al-Assad.38 This strategy has instigated fear in the communities and hindered the ability to assemble and organize protests. The Administration has also withheld food, water and medical supplies in areas controlled by opposition groups by preventing the delivery of United Nations humanitarian assistance.39 The denial of these basic needs has prompted communities to support the government despite their dissatisfaction. Notably, the al-Assad administration has been suspected of using chemical weapons against Syrian citizens, which resulted in the deaths of 1,400 civilian men, women and children according to one report.40 Senator John

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McCain accused the Syrian government of democide and maintained that the United States must draw a red line. Al-Assad’s possession of chemical weapons also served as protection against foreign adversaries and considered chemical weapons as his most “strategic deterrent against Israel.”

Uncommitted Actors

Minority communities within Syria such as the Christians and Druze populations have not aligned with the al-Assad administration or the opposition. They refuse to align with opposition forces due to the fear of living under the Sunni-Arab majority. On the other hand, they acknowledge the shortcomings of the al-Assad administration. This uncommitted stance has provided Assad with the narrative that he is protecting the country against terrorist groups.

Opposition Groups

According to Jan Egeland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council, by 2013, there were more than 2,000 opposition groups within Syria. It is estimated that

41 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *The Situation in Syria*, 3-6.


some 135,000 to 211,000 fighters make up the conglomeration of the varying opposition groups.\textsuperscript{45} This has created ambiguity amongst the groups. Some organizations wish to disassemble the al-Assad administration whilst others fight for control over territories.\textsuperscript{46} Despite differences in objectives, attempts to amalgamate have been made, with moderate success. Within Syria, the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) provides a platform for the oppositionists to assemble. The opposition forces have often collectively been known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The FSA is made up of Syrian army defectors, amateur fighters and foreign fighters. The main goal for the FSA is the removal of President Assad from power.\textsuperscript{47}

The United States worked closely with the SOC in order to build a better connection with the Syrian population. The United States believed that a political body like the SOC was essential for negotiating the removal of al-Assad. However, the SOC was not intended to lead the transition. Despite a close partnership – the SOC held talks


in Washington in late 2013 – the United States hesitated to supply the opposition forces because of the many divisions within the group.48

Terrorist Groups

The civil conflict has unfortunately also provided opportunities for the growth of terrorist groups. One of the most notorious opposition groups, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, ISIS, IS and hereinafter the Islamic State) stemmed from the emergence of two organizations in 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and the al-Nusra Front, which is an extension of al Qaeda in Iraq. However, the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front have different objectives: al-Nusra Front’s primary objective is the removal of al-Assad, whilst the Islamic State seeks to gain control over territory.49 The Islamic State in particular evolved expeditiously: in September 2013 the violent non-state actor controlled no districts in the town of Aleppo. By the end of the year however, it controlled a quarter of the city. The group has engaged in vicious tactics including kidnappings, torture and public beheadings.50 According to David Kilcullen, a strategist and counterinsurgency expert, the al-Nusra Front has proved the most strategically challenging to the regime, by expelling the regime from key coastal provinces and freeing hundreds of prisoners.51

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51 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Syria after Geneva: Next Steps for U.S. Policy, 32.
Foreign Fighters

According to the FSA, by November 2013 an estimated 5,000 foreign fighters traveled to Syria to join the opposition fighters.\textsuperscript{52} Particularly Chechens from Caucasus, Uzbeks from Central Asia, and Tatars from the Ukrainian Crimea appear to be taking a page out of David Ben-Gurion’s book: they travel to Syria in order to fight against the Assad regime, which is a key Russian ally, and to learn military skills to fight against Russian oppression back home.\textsuperscript{53} By January of 2015, it was estimated that 19,000 from 90 countries joined the opposition forces in Syria.\textsuperscript{54}

External actors in the Syrian Conflict

Iran, Russia and Hezbollah support the Assad administration and its attempts to defeat the opposition groups. Israel, Iraq and Lebanon have taken a neutral stance and have not aligned with either side.\textsuperscript{55} The actors supporting the opposition in order to aid the removal of President al-Assad are United States, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Libya, the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) and Turkey.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} R. Kim Cragin, “Semi-Proxy Wars and U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy,” 317.
\item \textsuperscript{53} U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, \textit{Syria after Geneva: Next Steps for U.S. Policy}, 33.
\item \textsuperscript{54} R. Kim Cragin, “Semi-Proxy Wars and U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy,” 311.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Jeff Martini Erin York and William Young, “Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition,” 2.
\end{itemize}
Supporters of the Opposition Forces

Turkey and Jordan have experienced an overflow of refugees and both countries want to contain the conflict as a result. Libya’s support for the Syrian opposition stems from a sense of solidarity with fellow Arab Spring revolutionaries.57

The United States and Saudi Arabia both have interests in the broader balance of power in the region and want to depose al-Assad due to his strong ties with Iran.58 For both countries, consolidating the transition of power in Syria would present the opportunity to target Iran. These developments could serve to increase trust of the United States in the Arab World. Leon Panetta declared that the stability of Syria was vital to our strategic interest of empowering regional allies such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel in addition to ensuring the stability of Iraq.59


59 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, The Situation in Syria, 8-12.
Supporters of the al-Assad Government

Russia is one of Syria’s key allies, dating back to the Cold War. Vladimir Putin’s desire to rise to power and the return of a bipolar world has served to al-Assad’s benefit. Russia’s only naval port in the city of Tartus has created an alignment between the two countries.60 In addition, Russia has economic interests in Iran’s survival due to its nuclear arms deal with the nation.61 However, Russia’s interests in Syria are based on economic benefits and ambitions for supremacy. Al-Assad’s most beneficial allies are Iran and Hezbollah, who depend on Syria for existential purposes.62

Iran’s main ally in the Arab World is Syria. Syria and Iran’s longstanding ties date back to the 1979 revolution and have strengthened over the years. Syria’s survival is vital to prevent any further isolation of Iran and its subsequent loss of status in the region. For both Syria and Iran, the alliance also prevents the United States and its allies from growing as the primary influence in the region. However there is pressure for the conflict in Syria to conclude for Iran due to financial strain due to sanctions imposed by the United States and European Union (EU).63

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60 Jeff Martini, Erin York and William Young, “Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition,” 2.

61 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, The Situation in Syria, 23.


Finally, Syria serves as Hezbollah’s main supply route for weapons. The Lebanese Hezbollah sent 2,000 fighters to Syria in order to help the al-Assad administration successfully retake the town of Qusayr from the opposition fighters. Hezbollah’s interests in Syria are not selfless: Qusayr is the portal to the Bekka Valley Lebanon. On occasion, Syria and Hezbollah have also coordinated against Israel. The relationship between the al-Assad administration and Hezbollah is mutually beneficial for survival purposes.

An historic humanitarian crisis

At the heart of the adversity in the Syrian war are the civilians suffering at the hands of the al-Assad administration, the opposition fighters and foreign adversaries. According to Mr. Egeland, with 30 years experience as a humanitarian and aid worker, the Syrian conflict is historically the worst global humanitarian crisis. By 2014, 12 million people in Syria were displaced: 6.5 million civilians displaced inside Syria, whilst another 2.5 million were forced to flee the country. Another 3 million civilians were victims of besieged communities, unable to migrate. This is due in part to the loss of public interest, as the Syrian conflict has not attracted attention from the public like the

64 Jeff Martini, Erin York and William Young, “Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition,” 2.


former Yugoslavia or Rwanda in the 1990’s. Mr. Egeland credits the lack of popular interest due to “the narrative that it is bad guys against bad guys.”

Additionally, Syrian civilians have suffered due to the United Nations’ decision to prioritize cooperation with the Syrian government. Unlike aid delivery methods employed in the former Yugoslavia in which the United Nations ignored the Serb government’s disapproval for delivering assistance, the United Nations has “not undertaken a single aid delivery inside the country without government consent, despite multiple Security Council resolutions sanctioning this.” This has given the government power to restrict delivery to anti-government communities and employ siege tactics as a weapon of war.

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Chapter IV
Model I: The Rational Policy Model

Model I treats foreign policy decisions as acts taken by the state as a unitary rational actor. What does the United States hope to achieve with its policy toward Syria? With the Arab Spring protests developing at a provocative time amid the War on Terror, a primary goal for America has been to gain the trust of the Arab World. For this reason, the United States wanted to help lead the peaceful democratic transition, first by asking al-Assad to step down. The United States also encouraged diplomatic exchange between the Syrian government and the opposition forces, in particular the SOC.

Another factor considered is the criticism the United States received from the international community for its leadership role amid the War on Terror and the subsequent turmoil that took place in the Middle East. As a result, the United States employed an attitude of extreme caution toward a military intervention. Facilitating a peaceful transition therefore presented new challenges to overcome as a rational actor in the current global political atmosphere. Consequently, a priority for the United States has been to work together with an international coalition in order to attain legitimacy.

American policies leading the democratic transition

In 2011, Syrian activists took to the streets to demand an end to the repressive al-Assad government. The government responded with brute force and the growing
contention between the government and protesters captured the attention of the world. Within a year Secretary Clinton accused Assad of war crimes. In March of the same year, the United States and allies pledged increased humanitarian assistance and non-lethal weapons to support the opposition, hinting at a future partnership.

With some irony, the Syrian strategy was in direct opposition to the American strategy toward the Middle East amid the War on Terror. In the years preceding the Syrian conflict, the United States pressured nations to combat violent non-state actors. In Syria, the United States worked with non-state actors to combat a terroristic government. Senator McCain urged for American leadership to put an end to the killings of civilians by al-Assad’s administration. He believed that the opposition forces were “fighting and dying because they want the same universal rights and freedom that we are guaranteed in our constitution.”

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Working with the opposition groups was intended to create a Western-friendly opposition force, whilst simultaneously decreasing the risk of rebellion groups working with local and foreign actors with destabilizing agendas. This form of shuttle diplomacy – working with partners on the ground rather than introducing an American presence directly – was criticized because it limited American influence and control over events on the ground.

General Dempsey cited two reasons for not introducing military presence in Syria: first, if an American presence were established, regional actors would take a step

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back and rely on the United States to eliminate the conflict. Second, the General believed that American military power should be used only to deter formidable entities such as Russia, China, North Korea and Iran. For these reasons he, as well as President Obama, supported a multilateral collaboration to mitigate the conflict in Syria. Moreover, a multilateral coalition would be beneficial because it would bestow a certain level of legitimacy. Other nations are less likely to criticize American policies if they are also involved in carrying out the attacks.

Cost/Benefit of Multilateral and Unilateral Efforts

From the beginning, American policy reflected an inclination toward a multilateral approach. In *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*, Dr. Nasr writes that the Obama administration policy toward the Middle East is the image of a superpower in retreat, working from behind the scenes. He points out the contentious relationship between the State Department and the White House – and in particular, President Obama, Secretary Clinton and Richard Holbrooke – asserting that the State Department experienced difficulty in joining discussions and influencing the policy toward Syria. According to Dr. Nasr, Clinton and Holbrooke favored a stronger

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American presence in Syria but White House staff worked to filter messages received by the President.75

The tactical maneuvers, he added, did not amount to a coherent strategy.76 For instance, a key element of American policy targeted al-Assad’s possession of chemical weapons. President Obama stated that if chemical weapons were used, that would be a “red line” that would “change his calculus.”77 Yet when evidence concluding the use of chemical weapons by the al-Assad administration was presented by US intelligence, the President failed to act in part due to lack of congressional support.78

Instead, the Obama administration joined the international coalition – notably, Russia – and focused on fighting the Islamic State, in exchange for the removal of al-Assad’s chemical weapons. Frustrated, Senator Corker called the fixation on the removal of chemical weapons a “shiny object”, citing the low number of casualties – in comparison to the 40,000-barrel bombs used to kill thousands of people – calling this fixation a “ruse.” Mr. Countryman concurred, stating that chemical weapons were never an “important part of the military equation causing the tragedy in Syria.”79

The President wanted support from Congress and if possible, the international community, before employing the use of force in Syria. This is because President Obama

76 Vali Nasr, The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat, 1- 30.
did not believe that the United States President had the power to engage in a war without congressional support except in cases of self-defense. In 2007, the then-Illinois Senator stated that the President “does not have the power under the Constitution to unilaterally authorize a military attack in a situation that does not involve stopping an actual or imminent threat to the nation.”\(^80\) In the case of Libya, the President authorized air strikes because he secured the backing of the international community – even Russia and China. Yet in Syria he lacked authorization from both Congress and the United Nations Security Council. According to Michelle Bentley, President Obama turned to the use of chemical weapons as “decisive intervention language” to promote a multilateral intervention.\(^81\)

Veritably, in response to the criticism of walking back his “red line” comment, President Obama stated that the international community, rather than Obama himself, established the red line. This statement established Syria as a responsibility of the world, rather than the United States alone.\(^82\) During the early years of the War on Terror, the United States was first criticized for loosening criteria for the preemptive doctrine and later it was criticized for failing to intervene in Syria. To avoid “another Iraq” the United States looked to the United Nations for multilateral cooperation. The UNSC however failed to solicit votes for the sought-after humanitarian intervention under the doctrine of

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\(^81\) Bentley, “Strategic taboos: chemical weapons and US foreign policy,” 1045.

\(^82\) Bentley, “Strategic taboos: chemical weapons and US foreign policy,” 1037.
the R2P. The main criticism for the intervention, declared by Russia and China, was the enumeration of the near total transition in the government by the United States-led coalition. Russia insisted that the United Nations use language that respects Syria’s sovereignty.\textsuperscript{83}

It was not only foreign leaders that exercised caution for militarily intervening in Syria. Leon Panetta, citing previous challenges in Libya, also supported multilateral engagement in Syria.\textsuperscript{84} The Libya lesson for the United States was clear: it was necessary for the international community to align and create a well-defined agenda in order for the intervention against al-Assad to work. President Obama refused to initiate further actions without the support of Congress and international allies. Instead the \textit{Geneva Communique} paved the way to a peaceful democratic transition.\textsuperscript{85}

In 2012, the Action Group for Syria came together at the United Nations Office in Geneva to secure common objectives, such as calling for an end to the killing and human rights abuses in Syria. The Action Group was made up of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations and the League of Arab States, ambassadors from China, Russia, the US and United Kingdom and several Gulf Countries. Together, the Group implemented a six-point plan for the immediate cessation of armed violence by all party’s involved, clear steps for the establishment of a transitional government and rapid steps for the peaceful


\textsuperscript{84} U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, \textit{The Situation in Syria}, 8.

dialogue and negotiation between the opposition forces and the government. However, the Geneva Communique plan ended abruptly, due to Kofi Annan’s resignation in the “mission impossible.”

The international community went back to the drawing board, meeting for a second time at Geneva II. Objectives outlined for diplomatic discussions conflicted as the United States pushed the belief that removing al-Assad was essential to ending the conflict, whilst Russia’s main focus was on containing Islamic terrorism and extremism. The West, the Gulf countries and Turkey financially supported the opposition groups in order to suppress the Government. Russia and Iran on the other hand militarily and financially supported the Syrian government bringing to naught much of the effort contributed by the United States to weaken the regime. Ultimately, the inability to come to terms at the international table led to an “escalating stalemate.”

US – Syrian Opposition Alliance and Efforts to Combat Terrorism

In order to help the Syrian people expel al-Assad, the United States Central Command proposed to remove some moderate Syrian fighters from the battlefield to train

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and form a more coherent unit. Conceptually this was a sound strategy, however once back on the field the group was rejected not only by al-Assad’s forces but also the Islamic State, al-Nusra and other opposition forces on the ground. This unfortunately led to more fighting, this time between the opposition forces. Following this disappointment, the United States looked to equip and train other credible actors on the ground.90

In “Notes from the Chairman,” Martin Dempsey, retired United States Army General, former Chief of Staff and later the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, defended the decision to work with partners on the ground – the opposition groups in Syria – because he believed it was the most effective way to counter those who “seek to hold ground.” Although this approach would take far longer than if United States military was deployed, he explained, this method was predicted to have a longer lasting effect, such as 20 years.91

The United States remained cautious and committed to non-lethal weapons instead of providing the opposition with a missile system. The challenge they faced rested on the divisions within the opposition. As a result, the ability of the insurgency to defeat the Government was significantly limited.92 As a result, a working partnership with the group remained weak and limited. A stronger cooperation would have likely increased the capabilities of the opposition against the al-Assad government. The United States

90 Rose, “Notes from the Chairman,” 6.

91 Rose, “Notes from the Chairman,” 6–7.

refused to provide heavy artillery to the opposition forces due to the divisions. It is difficult to remotely control the weapons once they have been distributed.

The contention also kept the group from being taken seriously on the world stage. Without a formidable opposition force, it remained difficult to justify the removal of al-Assad. The Opposition’s lack of political legitimacy made it difficult to reach a compromise during the Geneva II talks because the al-Assad administration, Russia and Iran did not perceive the Opposition as a legitimate and formidable entity.93

Meanwhile, the United States pushed to coordinate a more cohesive alignment between three regional American allies: Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. All three states financially supported the opposition however their interests and coordinating policies diverged. A more cohesive alignment between the three states could lead to a stronger, effective and a more unified Syrian opposition.94 Uniting the enablers would help to decrease the violence amongst the divisions within the opposition. In addition, a united Syrian opposition would be taken more seriously and gain legitimacy in its fight against al-Assad.

The aspiration to weaken the Syrian government via a protracted insurgency came at a price.95 This plan is vulnerable to exploitation by terrorist organizations. According to Keren Eva Fraiman, weakening the government in turn weakens its ability to govern


95 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Syria after Geneva: Next Steps for U.S. Policy, 32.
and combat terrorist groups. In addition, the government may not seek to combat these groups, if they also present a challenge to its enemies. 96 Indeed, although extremist groups have been somewhat problematic, the al-Assad administration’s survival remained a top priority. Combating terroristic activities conducted against civilians was relatively low on the list, especially since the Government was leading in such activities.

To combat the aforementioned elements of extremism, Ambassador Patterson introduced the plan to pay salaries for the local police, teachers, taxi workers and other public service jobs. This approach directly opposed the main attraction to the reason that many Syrians joined the opposition forces: they pay salaries for citizens otherwise unable to provide for their families in time of war. In addition, to ensure that assistance reached the intended beneficiaries, the United States was sending materials directly to vetted commanders. 97

Humanitarian Efforts Leading US Policy

Ultimately, the divisions within the opposition, the conflict between the opposition and the government, and the external actors involved affected civilians most severely. With Syrians leading the highest recorded number of refugees and/or displaced persons in the history of the world, the United States led the humanitarian efforts as the


single largest donor for humanitarian assistance to Syria. By 2014, America allocated more than $1.7 billion dollars to help those affected by the conflict. Nearly $340 million dollars of that money was contributed to the work of non-governmental organizations (NGO’s).98 Most of the assistance was delivered through “worthy international organizations.”99 This aid was also used to supply non-lethal weapons to the Syrian opposition forces, to local governments to help supplement salaries and deter citizens from joining extremist organizations, and to food and medical supplies.100 By 2015, the United States donated more than $5 billion dollars to assist with the historic humanitarian crisis.101

Unfortunately, many of the aid workers working for the international organizations charged with the task of delivering assistance were not equipped with legitimate visas, which prevented them from delivering aid in Syria. In “Taking sides: The United Nations’ loss of Impartiality, Independence and Neutrality in Syria,” it was concluded that the delivery of aid was hindered by the Syrian government. This resulted directly from the UN cooperation with the demands made by the Syrian government. From the beginning in 2011, the Syrian government adopted the strategy of siege as a


weapon of terror. Government-besieged towns such as Daraa were prevented from receiving humanitarian assistance.\textsuperscript{102} Consequently, the Syrian population was forced to support the government as a survival mechanism.

Moreover, the government stripped many non-Syrian aid workers of their visas, further manipulating aid deliveries. As a result, “a culture of compliance” emerged. United Nations agencies were required to ask permission from the government to deliver aid, and shockingly, not a single aid delivery was made within Syria sans the government’s permission. Despite sanctions by the Security Council disavowing this course of action, the agencies were required to seek the consent of the government throughout the conflict. In 2015, nearly 99\% of aid deliveries were distributed to government-controlled territories.\textsuperscript{103} Only less than 1\% in besieged districts received UN aid.\textsuperscript{104} Furthermore, the government ignored nearly 75\% of the aid delivery requests made by the United Nations.\textsuperscript{105} This is a clear breakaway from the former Yugoslavia in

\textsuperscript{102} “Taking Sides: The United Nations’ loss of impartiality, independence and neutrality in Syria,” Executive Summary.


which American and United Nations workers ignored the Serb government’s rejection of
aid distribution to Bosnia, in addition to Russia and China’s veto at the Security Council
table.

In Syria, the Security Council employed a diplomatic approach, working with the
government to deliver assistance rather than resisting its arbitrary aid delivery motives.
Leaders of the United Nations cited security concerns for aid workers to justify the lack
of deliveries. On the other hand, a separate study attributed the lack of deliveries by the
United Nations to “internal politics and strategic reasons” rather than security
concerns.106 David Miliband, the President of the International Rescue Committee (IRC)
explained that due to the vast amount of aid going to al-Assad’s people, he could not
afford to kick the United Nations out of Damascus. Despite the circumstance, the Syrian
government maintained its sovereign powers throughout the conflict, significantly
hindering the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people.107

Finally, the number of Syrian refugees admitted to the United States has been
relatively low in comparison to the large number of refugees the conflict has produced.
The vetting process for Syrian refugees is exceptionally long – anywhere from 18 to 24
months as affirmed by the State Department. As noted in the graph below, the number of

106 James Darcy, Evaluation Synthesis and Gap Analysis, Syria Coordinated
Accountability and Lessons Learning (CALL) Initiative, Report Commissioned by the
Steering Group for Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations, May 2016, accessed
December 7, 2016,

107 Colum Lynch, ‘UN’s fear of angering Assad leaves gap in Syria aid effort’,
Foreign Policy, December 30, 2014, accessed December 20, 2016,
http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/30/u-n-s-fear-of-angling-assad-leaves-gap-in-syria-
aid-effort/.
Syrian refugees entering the country in 2013 and 2014 was so low that Syria did not even show on the list of top ten countries accepted by the United States, despite Syrians leading the refugee lineup.

![Figure 3. Refugees and Asylees in the United States, Migration Information Source.](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugees-and-asylees-united-states)

Model I enumerates the overall US national policy objectives toward Syria. Whilst the Obama Administration condemned the human rights violations in Syria, it prioritized working with, rather than leading, the international coalition to destabilize the al-Assad government. Without the approval of Congress and the UNSC for a military strategy, diplomatic engagement paved the way for leading the democratic transition in Syria. The subsequent sections examine the frames of reference and how individuals at various levels of the government helped to shape US policy.

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Chapter V
Model II: the Organizational Process Model

Model II addresses the Syrian crisis as identified by relevant government institutions. How can the United States help to facilitate the peaceful democratic transition against the background of multiple regional and extra-regional actors involved in the conflict? One of the main problems the United States faced in promoting diplomatic negotiations are the divisions within the opposition forces, essentially rendering the opposition inoperative.

Similar divisions existed within the United States government when it came to policy formulation concerning Syria. Under this model, we are able to determine that although the Legislative Branch and the Executive Branch shared a concern for following international protocol, members of Congress and White House staff disagreed on the extent to which the United States should lead the transition in Syria. Congress for example, worried that without international backing the United States would find itself in the middle of yet another costly war in addition to criticism by the international community for vague reports concluding the use of chemical weapons. Senator Kerry on the other hand warned that America’s leadership role would be questioned if we did not employ air strikes against the Syrian government for its use of chemical weapons. He argued that inaction would lead to greater disputes down the line. In confronting the Syrian crisis, Model II identifies the “outputs” stemming from patterns of behavior.
American Policies Leading the Democratic Transition

In 2013 the Foreign Affairs Committee weighed the likelihood of success for tipping the balance of power should the United States conduct air strikes. General Dempsey outlined the following steps to be taken by the United States that he deemed necessary in order to tip the balance in Syria in favor of the Opposition: to advise and assist the opposition; conduct limited airstrikes; establishing a no-fly zone; establishing buffer zones and finally, controlling chemical weapons. However, General Dempsey said that the Obama Administration was not asking for permission for Congress for these extended measures.\textsuperscript{109}

Instead, General Dempsey believed that the United States must keep its “red line” promise and employ limited air strikes to deter al-Assad from using chemical weapons in the future. Keeping the “red line” promise would preserve America’s standing in the world. General Dempsey, Secretary Kerry and Secretary Hagel believed that if the United States did not act against al-Assad for his use of chemical weapons, the likelihood of the US meeting with the same question within months was highly possible.\textsuperscript{110} Senator Kerry supported the plan, declaring that diplomatic efforts were made – through Russia and Iran – to send messages to warn al-Assad against the use of chemical weapons. Because these unsuccessful diplomatic efforts were made, the use of force was necessary to ratchet it


\textsuperscript{110} U.S. Congress, Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives, \textit{Syria: Weighing the Obama Administration’s Response}, 60.
Thus a chief objective for General Dempsey was to uphold President Obama’s promise in order to uphold the position of the United States in the world.

Cost/Benefit of Multilateral and Unilateral Efforts

In 2012 and 2013, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) joined the State Department in its recommendation for a limited United States-led military intervention, similar to the military plan undertaken during the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia in Kosovo. Similarly in the Kosovo case, Russia and China vetoed the UNSC Resolution 1244. In Kosovo however, the United States ignored Russian and Chinese dissent and upheld the calls for unimpeded delivery of international aid and military. Furthermore, it secured a safe environment for refugees and displaced persons to return home in safety. More importantly, the American and NATO-led military intervention forced the Serb government to withdraw its troops. Senator John McCain also supported the plan. The hesitation by the Obama administration, mainly the Pentagon and the National Security Council, rested on the involvement of Iran and Russia, which was a key difference between the Kosovo and Syria cases.

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In 2013, following an assessment made by the American intelligence concluding the Syrian government’s use of the nerve gas sarin that resulted in 1,429 deaths, including 426 children, President Obama and White house officials pushed for targeted American-led military strikes against the government in Syria. Fearing that the chemical attack by the al-Assad government would risk making “a mockery of the global prohibition on the use of chemical weapons,” the President declared that he would seek approval from Congress for military strikes – a step that is not legally necessary. The goal was to deter and degrade al-Assad’s ability to employ the use of chemical weapons in the future. The administration wanted to defend international norms of the prohibition of chemical weapons by leading as the indispensable nation.

In response, at the September 4, 2013 congressional hearing “Syria: Weighing the Obama Administration’s Response,” Congress rejected the bid to pursue military actions against al-Assad. In particular, the objections by Congress came as a result of the lack of international support. The decision followed the British Parliament’s vote against David Cameron, who supported joining the US-led military strikes. In addition, Congress worried that taking military action would force the United States to commit to the Syrian cause for an extended period of time, similar to Iraq and Iran. Senator Kerry explained the goal of the administration was to make clear to al-Assad the consequences of using

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chemicals weapons.¹¹⁶ General Dempsey insisted that the administration was not seeking “an extended, protracted period of time” campaign in Syria. On the other hand he stated that it would be “hard for me to say that this is other than an act of war.”¹¹⁷ The House decided that punishing al-Assad was too risky if it meant engaging in yet another war in the Middle East.

Members of the House hesitated to support the President’s initiative because they did not fully trust intelligence reports. Because “the last time we went into war… the facts we were given were lies or misleading,” Senator Vargas asked Secretary Kerry to promise that the information supplied is to “…the best of your ability, that you are not lying, that you are not holding anything back… that you promise us that you are telling the truth.” Presumably, Senator Vargas was thinking back to Iran, when it was suggested that the United States invasion of Iran was due to the possession of weapons of mass destruction, which were not found. Secretary Kerry responded by confirming that to the best of his ability, the carefully vetted information was accurate.¹¹⁸

The information concluding that chemical weapons were used did indeed vary among reports. A British intelligence report stated that “at least 350 fatalities” resulted from the use of chemical weapons in the August 21, 2013 – the numbers of casualties reported were significantly less than American intelligence reports concluded. On the

¹¹⁶ U.S. Congress, Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives, Syria: Weighing the Obama Administration’s Response, 63.


¹¹⁸ U.S. Congress, Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives, Syria: Weighing the Obama Administration’s Response, 58.
other hand, a Syrian Arab news agency denied the allegations in its entirety, insisting that the report was forged by terrorists and later used by the United States as propaganda. According to Raymond Zilinskas, a microbiologist who formerly worked with the United Nations Special Commission who worked to monitor and destroy chemical weapons in Iraq following the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the assessments made were not based on “sample collections, chain of custody, methods of analysis, or results of analysis by reference laboratories,” further adding confusion to the question of chemical weapons.119

Though lab analyses may not have existed, pictures and videos display evidence of trauma. In September 2013, BBC published photos and videos of Syrians with symptoms consistent with the use of chemical agents, such as “blurred vision, shortness of breath and loss of consciousness.”120

US – Syrian Opposition Alliance and Efforts to Combat Terrorism

In the beginning, American policy toward Syria targeted the removal of al-Assad from his post. However, the growing Islamic extremism was becoming increasingly problematic. In particular, the Islamic State managed to gain ground by shifting between maneuver and guerrilla warfare. The Islamic State uses highly developed media operations to recruit young men from countries like Egypt, Libya, Nigeria and other

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119 Daniel Horner, "White House Makes Case for Syria Strike."

120 BBC, “Syria chemical attack: What we know”
nearby countries. The United States feared that rebels would fight amongst each other following al-Assad’s fall similar to Afghanistan (1992), and Libya (2011). The Islamic State targeted civilians aligned with the Government or other non-state groups. Especially due to the barbaric and inhuman videos released in 2015, the United States felt pressured to respond.

Figure 4. Jordanian pilot, Moaz al-Kasasbeh, was captured after his plane was downed, according to Jordanian Intelligence. On January 3, 2015, the Islamic State immolated al-Kasasbeh during a live video, later released through social media channels.

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122 Max Fisher, “The State Department’s Dissent Memo on Syria: An Explanation.”

Operation Tidal Wave II, named after the Operation Tidal Wave campaign to target Romania’s oil industry during World War II, is the US-led anti-Islamic State campaign. It is estimated that 20,000 to 32,000 Islamic State fighters were killed by American airstrike in August of 2014. In September 2015, France also joined the campaign against the Islamic State – its fourth wave of strikes in Syria. The New York Times reported that the Islamic State generated nearly $500 million dollars from oil revenues according to the Treasury Department. The Obama administration and its allies have sought to suppress and defeat the Islamic State by diminishing its earning abilities, and subsequently, its ability to target civilians.

The United States Special Operations Forces (SOF) outlined a plan to train and equip 15,000 Syrians to combat the Islamic State. However according to Linda Robinson, a senior international policy analyst at the RAND Corporation, only 60 recruits – known as the New Syrian Forces (NSF) – were trained and equipped by June of 2015, whilst another 7,000 were recruits were scheduled for further training. The program to train Syrian fighters was suspended in October of 2015 due to the few Syrian recruits. According to Robinson, a more successful campaign would have resulted if the United

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125 Max Fisher, “The State Department’s Dissent Memo on Syria: An Explanation.”

126 Linda Robinson, “Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation,” 34.
States pushed for a combined fight against the Islamic State and the Syrian government, given that many Syrians opposed the government more intensely.\textsuperscript{127}

Reports that the SOF has trained “only a handful of rebels” amounted to failure in policy, according to former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton.\textsuperscript{128} Secretary Clinton maintained that fighting the Islamic State would be a difficult task with al-Assad still in place. Clinton supported a more robust campaign to train rebels in Syria, in contrast to President Obama. Prioritizing both, the fight against the Islamic State and the removal of al-Assad, were essential to a peaceful political transition in Syria. To bring an end to the war, the United States would have to “as they say, walk and chew gum at the same time,” she continued.\textsuperscript{129}

**Humanitarian Efforts Leading US Policy**

While the Obama administration hoped to avoid “another Iraq,” the possibility of another Rwanda was arising. The growing number of Syrian refugees surpassed that of World War II. Since the beginning of the conflict in March 2011 through the fiscal year 2015, the United States, through the Department of State, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Office of Food for Peace (FFP) and the State’s

\textsuperscript{127} Linda Robinson, “Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation,” 4-5.


\textsuperscript{129} Monica Alba, “Clinton: Defeating ISIS, Ousting Assad Both Top Priorities.”
Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) has contributed more than $5 billion dollars in humanitarian assistance. The United States is the single largest donor of humanitarian aid provided for Syria.\(^{130}\)

According to a dissent memo in which the State Department proposed a plan for American military intervention to be executed in 2016, as a result of the war since 2011, there were over 400,000 people dead, 12 million displaced and hundred of thousands trapped in besieged communities at the hands of the Syrian Government.\(^{131}\) Inside Syria, USAID and the State Department supply UN organizations and non-governmental organizations with funds as a part of an international canopy to deliver aid in Syria.\(^{132}\)

USAID stated that humanitarian assistance – such as food, shelter, health and nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene products – was reaching nearly four million people inside Syria. Although reaching four million people in Syria is a considerably successful humanitarian campaign, that is less than half of the displaced victims of war. According to the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), the delivery methods were made difficult by three main factors: a dangerous environment, difficulty with accessing certain areas and remote management of the agencies.\(^{133}\)


\(^{131}\) Max Fisher, “The State Department’s Dissent Memo on Syria: An Explanation.”

Moreover, the United States government closed its embassy in Damascus back in 2012 due to an unsafe environment as a result of the escalating conflict, making it more difficult to control events on the ground. In addition, violent non-state actors and the government seized humanitarian aid to keep for themselves. For example, in May 2015, the Islamic State seized the city of Palmyra and confiscated food and hygiene elements from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) totaling $50,000.\textsuperscript{134} The Syrian government also exploited humanitarian assistance by controlling its delivery routes and access to visa holders. According to a former official however, the government uses aid provided by the United Nations to provide for its supporters. The Syrian government could not afford to kick the United Nations out of Damascus and could most likely be coerced into being orderly.\textsuperscript{135} The Syria Campaign accused the United Nations of failing to define a “red line” and allowing the government to control aid operations without consequence.\textsuperscript{136} Both the United States and the United Nations failed to draw a red line to facilitate aid delivery by third parties. It was difficult to gain leverage without a US presence on the ground.

USAID hired a third party in October 2015 to assess and monitor in order to improve the ability of the delivery of humanitarian aid through its programs and partners. According to GAO, oversight for the detection and prevention of fraud could be


\textsuperscript{135} Taking sides: The United Nations’ loss of impartiality, independence and neutrality in Syria, 1.1.

\textsuperscript{136} Taking sides: The United Nations’ loss of impartiality, independence and neutrality in Syria, 2.3.
significantly strengthened by the United States. For example, it recommends implementing a QR (quick response) code, that can be used to monitor and track inventory.\textsuperscript{137} The Syria Campaign recommendations to the United Nations Secretary-General and donor governments, such as the United States, call for tougher sanctions – to demand the Syrian government’s cooperation with deliveries in the besieged areas, and if this is not possible to withdraw its operations from Damascus.\textsuperscript{138}

Model II summarizes the response of relevant organizations within the American government. The CIA and Department of Defense believed it was necessary for the US to enforce its “red line” promise in order to preserve the US standing in the world. On the other hand, Congress worried that doing so would result in a drawn out conflict similar to the War on Terror. Ultimately, Congress decided it was not worth the risk to engage in yet another war in the Middle East. The following section considers the outcomes in American policy toward Syria stemming from negotiations among government officials.


\textsuperscript{138} Taking sides: The United Nations’ loss of impartiality, independence and neutrality in Syria, 1. 1-3.
Chapter VI
Model III: The Bureaucratic Politics Model

Model III is based on the theory that a nation’s actions result from negotiations and compromises made by the nation’s top leaders, such as the President, Secretary of Defense, et al., stemming from their positions and responsibilities. The notion “where you stand depends on where you sit” results in these “outcomes.” For President Obama, an essential ingredient for military intervention toward Syria was the support of Congress or the international community, and ideally both. This is especially understandable since his presidency followed that of President George W. Bush and the infamous Iran nuclear weapons assumption that came undone.

For other leaders, such as Secretary Clinton, Secretary Kerry and General Dempsey, inaction was unthinkable due to the understanding that the future of the Middle East was being decided in Syria. There was a fear that the destabilization of Syria would undo any progress the United States made in Iraq amid the War on Terror. This model may be one of the most important models used to explain the development of American policy toward Syria since the American policies consisted of a mostly political approach.

American Policies Leading the Democratic Transition

On August 18, 2011, President Obama, “inspired by the Syrian peoples’ pursuit of a political transition to democracy,” called for President al-Assad to step down. He condemned the use of violence against protesters. Consequentially, he announced
Executive Order 13582 that froze all Syrian assets, blocked US persons from pursuing new investments in Syria and banned American petroleum imports from Syria.139

A year later, President Obama warned that if al-Assad began using chemical weapons against protesters in Syria, he “would be held accountable by the international community.”140 Speaking at the White House news conference in August, President Obama addressed the growing tensions between the Syrian government and Syrian people. Specifically, President Obama addressed the use of chemicals and the now-famous red line comments:

We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is if we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation…141

Once US intelligence assessment concluded that the al-Assad government had employed the use of chemical weapons, President Obama asked Congress to authorize air strikes against the Syrian government. In August of 2013, President Obama stated:

…I’m the president of the world’s oldest constitutional democracy. I’ve long believed that our power is rooted not just in our military might, but in our example as a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. And that’s why I’ve made a second decision: I will seek authorization for the use of force from the American people’s representatives in Congress.142


141 Max Boot, “Obama's executive-power roller coaster.”

142 Max Boot, “Obama's executive-power roller coaster.”
In addition to concerns regarding evidence for the use of chemical weapons, the House failed to solicit votes for air strikes because they worried it would lead to retaliation by Russia. Senator Kerry assured Congress that would not be the case and quoted the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov that Russia does not intend to engage in a war over Syria. Critics claimed that President Obama launched the 2011 air strikes in Libya and was looking to Congress to bail him out on the Syrian case. On record, President Obama looked to House representatives for authorization and leaders in Congress looked to Obama to make a decision. Both parties agreed that a more coherent policy was necessary for the Syrian conflict to settle down, but both departments hesitated to initiate action.

The disunity between the White House and the State Department was evident from the beginning. According to Dr. Nasr, the White House staff wanted to block any options presented by Richard Holbrooke or Hillary Clinton they deemed to be too bold, and of course both Holbrooke and Clinton supported a stronger American role in the Middle East. It was Secretary Clinton’s personal relationship with Obama that paved the way for the State Department to have a bit of influence in the diplomatic process, though not enough to heavily influence policy. Secretary Clinton voiced her frustration in an interview with the Atlantic stating, “What the Pentagon has been doing hasn’t worked,”

143 U.S. Congress, Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives, Syria: Weighing the Obama Administration’s Response, 61.

144 Max Boot, “Obama's executive-power roller coaster.”

145 Vali Nasr, The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat, 37.
adding that “Great nations need organizing principles” in terms of defending out security, interests and values. “Don’t do stupid stuff is not an organizing principle,” she continued referring to a statement previously made by President Obama.\(^\text{146}\)

Dr. Nasr posits that comprehensively, the verdict for President Obama’s policy toward the Middle East is that “it has not done too badly.” The administration’s policies during the Arab Spring helped dismantle governments but failed when it came to leading transitions toward democracy. Obama’s strategy – intended to improve relations with the Arab World – has been disengagement and what he calls a “lean back and wait” strategy. According to Dr. Nasr, the failure to commit to a greater military role in order to facilitate diplomatic breakthrough resulted in the failure to capitalize on the opportunity the Arab Spring presented. He quotes former American diplomat Martin Indyk, “Nowhere in Obama’s foreign policy has the gap been wider between promise and delivery than in the peace process.”\(^\text{147}\)

Cost/Benefit of Multilateral and Unilateral Efforts

Following the failure to commit to air strikes, the United States focused on al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons facilitated by the Group of Twenty (G20). Ambassador Patterson explained that the United States attempted to engage Russia to cooperate on the removal of chemical weapons. Some of the contingency plans, such as imposing sanctions and the attempt to engage Russia in diplomatic efforts to remove chemical

\(^{146}\) Monica Alba, “Clinton: Defeating ISIS, Ousting Assad Both Top Priorities.”

\(^{147}\) Vali Nasr, The Dispensable Nation, 159-161.
weapons, worked against American goals to cripple al-Assad’s forces and ensure his removal. In fact, from September 2013 when the diplomatic talks for the removal of the chemical weapons began, until the March 2014 hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, al-Assad had strengthened according to Mr. Countryman, the Assistant Secretary for International Security and Nonproliferation.

Senator Corker recalled the tens of thousand of civilians that died due to other weapons, such as barrel bombs, and called the removal of chemical weapons a “shiny object.” This disparity in the number of casualties further frustrated him because he believed it was a “great way for us to partner with Russia and move away from having any kind of strategy on the ground.” He called the fixation on chemical weapons a “ruse”, pointing out that the United States lacks a coherent strategy toward Syria.148 Dr. Nasr agreed, stating “essentially we turned Assad into a partner in an international agreement that requires his acquiescence.”149

US – Syrian Opposition Alliance and Efforts to Combat Terrorism

In October 2014, speaking before the Valdai International Discussion Club, Vladimir Putin blamed the United States involvement in Syria on “imperialistic ambitions”, and urged the United States not to “poison the consciousness of millions of people.” He pointed the finger at the United States for seeking alliances with groups on


the ground, stating that this is not “a method that seeks to discuss and agree on mutual
grounds of understanding.” As a result, he believed the United States and allies helped
arm the Islamic State. According to Putin, the Islamic State members are former
mercenaries paid by the United States, who later transferred to the Islamic State due to
better salaries and benefits. He accused the United States of engaging in “unprofessional
politics”, and of “not thinking of steps ahead”, suggesting that once the weapons are
handed over to the rebels, it is difficult to track and maintain control over said
weapons.150

Ambassador Patterson explained that the United States worked with moderate
rebel groups to lead the negotiations for a peace democratic transition, which included the
removal of al-Assad but not a total breakdown of the government. In addition, salaries
were paid for policemen, educators and others in order to prevent civilians from having to
resort to joining terrorist groups.151 No word on whether Putin is able to track and control
the weapons supplied to the Syrian government by Russia.

In contrast to Putin’s assertion, in 2015 the United States Embassy in Syria
tweeted that President al-Assad was not only avoiding targeting the Islamic State, but
actively sought to bolster their position. General Dempsey explained that from a strategic
perspective, due to the al-Assad government facing several adversaries at the same time,
it benefits him to allow his enemies to fight amongst each other because this weakens his

150 Vladimir Putin, “The World Order: New rules or no rules?” Presented at the
Valdai Discussion Club, Sochi, October 24, 2014,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYo93v3qJnU.

151 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Syria after Geneva:
Next Steps for U.S. Policy, 23.
enemies. The United States strategy, he continued, has been to build a moderate opposition group and take control of territories in Syria because “the future of Syria doesn’t run through al-Assad.” However, “given the complexities”, General Dempsey stated that it has been difficult to approximate a timetable.\textsuperscript{152}

Senator Coons, Chairman Menendez, Senator McCain and Senator Corker believed that the United States would need a new strategy to break the stalemate in Syria. They wrote to the President in support of a new plan that would facilitate a diplomatic breakthrough in a negotiated settlement. Ambassador Patterson agreed, stating that a more assertive military role would be necessary to tip the victory on the side of the moderate rebels.\textsuperscript{153}

**Humanitarian Efforts Leading US Policy**

Long before Syria, former President and Obama’s predecessor, George W. Bush famously stated in 2001, “You’re either with us or against us in the fight against terror” as the War on Terror commenced.\textsuperscript{154} Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski warned against the potential domino effect Bush’s rhetoric would generate. In


2005, Brzezinski spoke against alienating Muslims and criticized President Bush’s Islamophobic verbosity due to potentially unintended contribution of the radicalization of terrorist groups. Any short-term political gain, he warned, may cause resentment amongst Muslims, further reinforcing the significance of Usama bin Laden’s divisive rhetoric between the Muslim and non-Muslim world.155

Throughout his presidency, and especially during the Syrian refugee crisis, President Obama echoed a tone of unity and tolerance amongst Muslims in the United States and in global terms. He vehemently pursued a campaign against the discrimination of Muslims. Perhaps this rhetoric was his most powerful weapon against the discrimination of Muslims and of Syrian refugees. For instance, following an attack in San Bernardino, California by a Muslim couple in 2015, he urged Americans not to give in to fear, insisting isolated incidents are not representative of the religion. Delivering the speech from the Oval Office — one of three during his presidency, demonstrating its significance — The President stated, “this fight cannot be defined as a war between America and Islam.”156

At times President Obama was criticized for not using the term “Islamic Terrorism.” At a CNN presidential town hall, he explained he is careful to use the term because he does not want to “lump these murderers into the billion Muslims that exist


around the world, including in this country, who are peaceful, who are responsible, who, in this country are fellow troops and police officers and fire fighters and teachers and neighbors and friends.”

Certainly the rhetoric in addressing the Muslim world differed from the Bush administration to the Obama administration. Moran Yarchi introduced “framing,” which is an interpretive package politicians use to deliver their message in order to benefit their political agendas. Political actors frequently utilize public diplomacy to promote ideas and objectives. President Obama’s rhetoric was intended to minimize the “otherness” that developed during the War on Terror, which was particularly unfortunate for Syrian refugees. Western countries were hesitant to shelter refugees, leaving the victims of the Syrian war with no place to call home. Many countries were fearful of unintentionally inviting terrorists disguised as refugees. In one such example, in September 2015 a camera operator for a Hungarian nationalist television channel was caught on film kicking and tripping a refugee carrying a child at the Hungarian border. President Obama’s strategic rhetoric was used to win sympathy for Syrian refugees.

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Though the rhetoric between the Bush and Obama administration is notably different, proponents of the continuity theory have a strong case. Addressing Obama’s counterterror policy in “The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: The Liberal Tradition and Obama’s Counterterrorism Policy,” Michael Desch posits that the actual difference in policy between the Bush and Obama administration is quite minimal.\(^{160}\) This is especially noticeable in the case of Syrian refugees. For example, in 2013 the United States only accepted 36 Syrian refugees – an astonishingly small number compared to the large scale of Syrian asylum seekers, which ranged in the millions.\(^ {161}\)

Model III analyzes the bureaucratic politics in the development of American policies toward Syria. President Obama, a former constitutional law professor, believed that the President does not have the power to go to war without congressional approval except in the case of self-defense. With the failure of Congress to authorize limited air strikes against the al-Assad government, a diplomatic approach prevailed. Other players in the government – such as Secretary Clinton, Secretary Kerry and General Dempsey – were made to play by these rules since neither Congress nor the President introduced a military presence in Syria. The next section examines international politics considered in the American policy toward the Syrian conflict.


\(^{161}\) U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Syria after Geneva: Next Steps for U.S. Policy, 66.
Chapter VII

Model IV: International Politics Model

Dr. Allison did not include a model for international politics when he explained the Cuban Missile Crisis because “few interesting explanations of occurrences in foreign policy have been produced at that level of analysis.” Furthermore, he posits, “this restriction is not severe.”\textsuperscript{162} But, as Brian Ripley points out, scholars of foreign policy “can amend or challenge neorealism, but they cannot escape it.”\textsuperscript{163} The Syria case is a distinguished example that may be used to explain the link between power and a nation’s foreign policy objectives vis-à-vis the emergence of political globalization.

In analyzing policy decision-making processes toward the Syrian conflict, it is essential that we take into account the role of influential actors involved in Syria. Arguably, the involvement of other nations, non-state actors and world leaders helped shape American policy toward Syria. For instance, Congress was hesitant to grant permission to the Obama administration for initiating air strikes due to the British Parliament’s decision to abstain from the coalition. In addition, though the Russian Foreign Minister declared that Russia did not intend to go to war over Syria, Russia heavily bolstered the Syrian government’s position against opposition forces backed by

\textsuperscript{162} Allison, “Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” 691.

the United States. In turn, the United States was left with little option but to deal with outcomes due to the involvement of Russia and Iran – such as the growing number of Syrian refugees, the strengthening of the Syrian government’s position despite numerous sanctions placed by the United States, European and Arab allies. These undertakings led to shifts in policy as the United States scrambled to respond to the rapidly evolving events on the ground, which manifested as follows.

American Policies Leading the Democratic Transition

When the Obama administration sought permission from Congress to employ the use of air strikes against the Syrian government, France, Turkey and Arab States were prepared to join the United States in the use of force against al-Assad. Upon the rejection by Congress, the Geneva Communique plan heavily influenced American policy toward Syria. On the other hand, Geneva Communique frustrated key American allies, in particular Saudi Arabia and Israel as the peace agreement did not enumerate a timetable for any punishing consequences should the al-Assad government not comply. In addition, the peace agreement removed options for an American-led attack, which essentially eliminated any chance of air strikes against the al-Assad government.164

The United States also adopted sanctions that froze Syrian assets in the country, which prohibited certain business transactions. It called to its European and Arab World

allies to do the same to better challenge the oppressive government in Syria.\textsuperscript{165} Political scientists are not convinced that sanctions against Syria were the appropriate action to take. According to Tom Malinowski, sanctions are not always effective in cases such as Iraq and Syria. They are particularly effective if they are able to target the source of the problem – such as individuals or organizations – rather than targeting the country as a whole. As a global leader, the United States has the ability to impose sanctions that influence and shape events. But targeted sanctions are efficacious because they make it more difficult for the government to suggest that United States-imposed sanctions are meant to target the country as a whole and to hurt civil society.\textsuperscript{166}

Moreover, the June 2012 six-point plan outlined by United Nations Envoy Kofi Annan in the \textit{Geneva Communique} was a nonsuccess. The Syrian government failed to abide by the agreed upon ceasefires and efforts to work with the Syrian opposition toward a peaceful political transition. As a result, the United Nations suspended its mission in Syria following weeks of impeded access. Kofi Annan resigned five months following the initiation of the peace agreement, due to the growing use of force by the al-Assad government against the Syrian people. In addition, he cited a lack of unity among leading nations involved in the \textit{Geneva Communique}, calling it “mission impossible”, due to the “destructive competition” of the foreign actors involvement in Syria. “At a time when we

\textsuperscript{165} Executive Order 13582 of August 18, 2011, Blocking Property of the Government of Syria and Prohibiting Certain Transactions with Respect to Syria, Office of the Press Secretary, title 3 (2011).

need – when the Syrian people desperately need – action there continues to be finger-pointing and name-calling in the Security Council.”

The long-term consequences for not conducting air strikes against the Syrian government, according to Secretary Kerry, would be the world’s perception of America. The fight against the Islamic State was prioritized – which, as previously stated was responsible for about 2 percent of Syrian civilian casualties – compared to the majority of the casualties at the hands of the Syrian government and Russia. Secretary Kerry cautioned “politely and humbly, I very, very deeply believe it will invite other contests of conflicts that will put us to the test and potentially with much graver consequences.”

Cost/Benefit of Multilateral and Unilateral Efforts

The United States forged an alliance with the opposition forces to prevent them from aligning with destabilizing actors but failed to consider how the Syrian government would react to sanctions. The sanctions imposed by the United States, European and Gulf countries forced Syria to turn to Russia and Iran for help. For Russia, this was a dreamy alliance according to Charles Clover who transcribed Alexander Dugin’s *The Foundations of Geopolitics*. *The Foundations* is rooted in Sir Halford Mackinder’s

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lecture delivered in 1904, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” which centered Russia as the “heartland” of Eurasia. His theory – now known as “geopolitics” – posits that conflicts most likely arise between the leading sea power and leading land power, and because of this Russia was destined to be a primary actor in global competition. Russia, according to Mackinder, was geographically gifted and its land invulnerable to attacks made by nations with powerful navies and in control of the seas.

Mackinder’s theory would gain momentum decades later during the Cold War, serving as the basis of Russia’s “Manifest Destiny.” In 1997 thanks to Dugin, The Foundations revived Mackinder’s theory to influence the Russian military and foreign policy strategies. In the Foundations, Dugin quoted Jean-François Thiriart who believed that Hitler’s failure was due to his ambitions to make Europe German, but instead he should have tried to make it European. Dugin believed that Russia should aim for a Eurasian dominion instead of a Russian empire. The alliance with Syria and Iran therefore may very well be a pivotal point in Russian history for the following reasons: The ultimate goal for Russia is to annex Ukraine, divide Georgia and Finland whilst Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece would together make up the Russian South. According to Dugin, in order for the revival of the Russian primacy to manifest, Russia would first have to align with powers like Japan, Iran and Germany. The goal of the alliance is to fight the common enemy: “the rejection of Atlanticism, the strategic control of the USA, and the refusal to allow liberal values to dominate us.”170 In exchange,

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Azerbaijan would be gifted to Iran. Ultimately, the American decision to negotiate with Russia toward a plan to remove al-Assad’s chemical weapons may have benefited Russia in both short and long term goals.

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Ambassador Paterson explained that the recognition of the SOC by the United States and Friends of the Syrian People in 2012 was to highlight the group’s support, rather than endorse its replacement for Assad’s government.\textsuperscript{171} This strategy contradicted the motive of American sanctions against the Syrian government. If the United States did not lead the air strikes, no air strikes would be conducted. If the United States did not firmly support opposition leaders to replace al-Assad, why were they eager to remove al-Assad? This lack of commitment by the United States left the allies with no other option but to cooperate with the Syrian government.

In 2014 when the President announced plans to collaborate with Russia in a series of steps – including air strikes – to weaken and deter the Islamic State, many political scientists worried that the plan diverged from American objectives in Syria. This plan shifted most of the focus from isolating al-Assad to rebel groups. Robert J. Lieber, professor of Government and International Affairs at Georgetown University, questioned whether the Obama administration’s strategy of selective disengagement enhanced or putin/?utm_content=buffer0e33e&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer

hindered America’s national interests in Syria. Selective disengagement according to Lieber, has been the source of rising hostile powers in the Middle East and a threat targeting America itself. Furthermore, our allies have reached out to form other alliances, after it became visible that they could not count on America to keep its promises.\textsuperscript{172}

Indeed as Lieber points out, President Obama was reluctant to conduct air strikes against the al-Assad government – the main source of the killings in Syria – but joined Russia in the fight against the Islamic State. The peace agreement was a victory for the al-Assad government and its partners.\textsuperscript{173} Although the Islamic State is a threat to the stabilization process in Syria and a threat to America’s national interest, the policy to target the Islamic State in exchange for a nuclear deal was inadequate and only worked to advance the interests of Syria, Russia and Iran. Especially for Russia, the act of joining global actors to strike the Islamic State may have given them permission to arbitrarily bomb Syrian communities under the guise of targeting extremists made possible by a legitimate alliance. A more satisfactory plan would have included a clause enumerating the cessation of hostilities by the Syrian government and the opposition groups.


\textsuperscript{173} Omar S. Dahi, “Syria in Fragments,” 48.
Humanitarian Efforts Leading US Policy

In an historic refugee crisis, who will accept the responsibility to protect? Early in 2013 the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, warned against the growing contention in Syria and the alarming number of refugees stating, “Syria as a civilization is unraveling.”\(^{174}\) The world has witnessed that statement come to life since then. If history is any indication, the Syrian refugee crisis will be a stain in the record of the international community.

First, the existing human rights declarations have not been effectively enforced. For example, Syria and neighboring countries have not subscribed to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. Whilst Egypt and Turkey are signatories, Turkey’s rules apply only to refugees from Europe. In the meantime, following the fall of president Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, Syrian refugees were viewed unfavorably for possible ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.\(^{175}\) As the number of Syrian refugees grew, surrounding areas began to seek the establishment of controlled areas and refugee camps rather than risk the infiltration of towns and cities by the refugees. The displacement of the millions of Syrians in the neighboring region may formulate a new political map in the Arab World, warns Omar Dahi.\(^{176}\)

Some European countries, such as Sweden, France and Germany have opened their borders to refugees. However even in Europe, most refugees have been subjected to

\(^{174}\) Omar S. Dahi, “Syria in Fragments,” 45.
\(^{175}\) Omar S. Dahi, “Syria in Fragments,” 47.
\(^{176}\) Omar S. Dahi, “Syria in Fragments,” 45.
remote, segregated areas rather than integration into their societies. In addition, many
refugees have fallen prey to illegal smugglers, who charge 5,000 euros or more to
transport refugees into countries.\(^{177}\)

According to Dahi, the only likely way a peace agreement would effectively work
to assist refugees is a plan similar to the Dayton Accords, which facilitated the return of
refugees in Bosnia. The NATO Implementation Force mediated the Dayton Accord with
the support of some members of the international community. In particular, Dahi insists
that efforts by regional actors must be made. He blames the contention between Saudi
Arabia and Iran for the lack of unity in the region to assist refugees. The Syrian refugee
crisis must be interlaced with a military solution in order to advance the political solution
proposed by the United States and allies to bring the conflict to a halt and assist victims
of the war.\(^{178}\)

The International Politics Model is significant because it is a reminder that the
international system is anarchical. Unless the Responsibility to Protect is coupled with an
unyielding coercive power that can resolve crises, international treaties such as the
Geneva Communique will not effectively percolate. The Syrian crisis demonstrates that
states are power seeking rational actors, who seek to maximize individual security. For
example, regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey armed rebel forces for
their own strategic interests. If an alliance had formed, they would have been more
successful in carrying out the mission. Comprehensively, this model brings to light the
vulnerabilities of multipolarity.

\(^{177}\) Omar S Dahi, “Syria in Fragments,” 47.

Conclusion

This thesis sought to unpack a complex period of American diplomacy toward the Middle East using the Syrian case study. Dr. Allison’s conceptual models help to dissect policy decision-making processes within the American governmental institutions. The different analytical lenses demonstrate the hesitation by American policymakers across institutions to commit to a Syrian strategy given the complexities of the crisis. It is worth noting that policymakers faced a difficult decision “where the US is both expected to solve political crises and also criticized for over-involvement in those same issues.”

Comprehensively, model I weighs the American ambition to gain the trust of the Arab World against the need to repair the US standing in the international community resulting from the War on Terror. The model demonstrates the image of a superpower in retreat, prioritizing multilateral engagement rather than acting unilaterally to lead and target al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons. The United States hoped to achieve its ambition of removing al-Assad from power by supporting the opposition forces. Furthermore, it hoped to prevent the opposition from forging alliances with actors whose agendas were inconsistent with American objectives. Whilst the United States was the single largest donor of humanitarian assistance, it accepted a shockingly small number of Syrian refugees, especially in 2013 and 2014.

Model II further evaluates the need for America to keep its “red line” promise in order to preserve America’s image in the world against the possibility of engaging in an

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expensive, drawn out conflict. A plan for limited United States-led military intervention
never materialized because the House Foreign Relations Committee questioned US
intelligence reports of the use of chemical weapons. The US Special Operations Forces
plan to train and equip Syrian recruits to fight the Islamic State failed, mostly because
Syrians viewed the al-Assad government as the common enemy. Whilst USAID was able
to reach nearly 4 million Syrians, the Syrian government, and at times, the terrorist
groups, impeded the humanitarian assistance deliveries.

Model III considers the cautious approach of American leaders to weigh the pros
and cons for authorizing air strikes to uphold President Obama’s “red line” comment. The
multilateral efforts to cooperate with Russia conversely resulted in the strengthening of
the al-Assad government. Ambassador Patterson explained that moderate rebels were
only supplied with non-lethal weapons. Moreover, the United States paid the salaries of
local government workers to combat terrorism. Perhaps one of the most powerful
weapons to fight discrimination against Syrian refugees was President Obama’s rhetoric
that minimized discrimination against Muslims.

The international politics model is one of the most important models. It narrates
the shift of events on the ground due to regional and extra-regional actors ratcheting up
the assistance to the Syrian government and the opposition forces, which ultimately
resulted in an “escalating stalemate.” The Geneva Communique was largely a nonsuccess
due to the departure of Kofi Annan who cited “destructive competition’ of the foreign
actors involved. Furthermore, the United States, along with its allies, imposed sanctions
against the Syrian government, which may not have been effective as it forced Syria to
turn to Russia and Iran for help. This multilateral effort strengthened the ties between
Syria, Russia and Iran. The multilateral effort was further complicated when the United States and Russia joined forces to fight the Islamic State, largely neglecting the al-Assad government that is responsible for most of the civilian casualties. The overall global response to the Syrian humanitarian crisis was lackluster, especially due to the lack of unity among regional actors.

Model II and the international politics model in particular, are crucial for the comprehensive understanding of the decision-making processes in the Syria case. Model II is important because it highlights the hesitation and mistrust within the American government. Whilst all parties condemned al-Assad’s brute force against civilians, President Obama wanted to avoid “another Iraq.” Congress, on the other hand, questioned reports by the intelligence community. The international politics model underscores the complexities of multipolarity in Syria. Many nations are involved, yet no one is willing to commit to a strategy to break the stalemate. US policymakers have been made to choose between targeting the lesser of the many evils in Syria. The hesitation of the White House and Congress to develop a military strategy, along with the shifting of events on the ground forced US policy to deviate from its main objectives thus resulting in “schizophrenic” policies.
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